

Singing of divine identities in a liturgical space?

John Damascene's treatise on the Trisagion and his anti-heretical polemics

John Damascene, one of the most productive Greek theologians of the Middle Byzantine era, also composed a treatise on the Trisagion hymn, or how it should be sung correctly and why; a text that has been little discussed in contemporary scholarship. The present paper provides an overview of the work – with special reference to the notion of identity in John's description of the Trinitarian doctrine. It also examines the treatise especially in the context of anti-heretical polemics. The author argues that John's approach to the question of the correct way of singing the hymn is gentle: instead of using pejorative language, he even praises the object of his reproach.

NOTIONS OF 'IDENTITY' AND 'SPACE' are perhaps not the most commonly found in dogmatic theology, a field of theology that deals with the doctrinal teaching of the Christian church.¹ However, the source text of the present paper can easily be examined from both of these points of view. From the earliest centuries of Christianity the church has drawn clear distinctions between Christians and 'others': firstly a differentiation between the followers of Jesus Christ and the Jewish and pagan majority was asserted; then the church began to narrow down its theological teachings, drawing a line between Orthodoxy and heresy. It

is within the context of anti-heretical polemics² that our source text, John Damascene's *On the Trisagion*, can be situated.

Before embarking on our discussion, a few definitions should be made in relation to the use of the terms 'identity' and 'space' in patristic sources. In modern scholarship, these two notions have acquired a broad variety of meanings. To begin with identity, defining this notion is complex even within the same discipline, let alone when taking into account the interdisciplinary uses of the term. The philosophical notion of identity could be defined as the relation each thing bears only to itself.³ In the social sciences, on the other hand, identity is seen as the sum of qualities, beliefs, personality and other agents that constitute a person or a group of persons: it is in this sense of self-image that identity is perhaps most usually discussed in the humanities nowadays. The early Christian theological understanding of identity, however, built on the philosophical tradition of the Greeks. Naturally, due to the transcendent character of God, the concept of identity here cannot mean our

1 This approach of using the notions of identity and space was inspired by the original occasion I had to deliver the present paper. It was first read at the Fifth Finnish Colloquium of Middle Eastern and North African Studies, organised at the Joensuu campus of the University of Eastern Finland on 29–31 May 2017. The Colloquium was entitled 'Transformations of Identity and Space in the Middle East and North Africa.'

2 As Jürgen Stenzel (1986: 4–5) has noted, it is not easy to define the notion of polemics (see also Lamping 1986 in the same volume). It refers to aggressive speech, but not all forms of it. There is a very hazy line distinguishing polemics from slander. On the other hand, satire is different from polemics: satire is based on comedic representation, while polemics is based on argumentation. This is the case also in John's treatise, as we shall see.

3 The question of identity is particularly important in Aristotelian philosophy. He discusses the concept of ταὐτόν ('same') in his *Topics*, dividing identity into the categories of numerical, species and generic (see Mignucci 2002).

examination of God's self-conceptualization: He is hidden from the understanding of believers, so they are unable to examine His identity.⁴ But if we speak of the identity (or actually identities) of the Christian divinity in the more philosophical mode of relations,⁵ we come to a crucial dogmatic issue within Triadology, that is, the definition of what the one and the three in the Holy Trinity are. During the fourth century, the definitions of the terms *hypostasis* and *substance* (οὐσία), denoting the particular and the universal, were established through synodal decrees.⁶ The Greek fathers, starting from the Cappadocians in the fourth century (and later, among others, John Damascene, who is our focus in this paper) often speak of ιδιώματα, the properties of the different persons (or, as the Greek fathers prefer to say, hypostases) of the Trinity.⁷ The names Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit themselves, according to Gregory Nazianzen, denote exactly what the relations between each hypostasis are. These ιδιώματα, then, make up the identity of each hypostasis in relation to other hypostases: the properties of the divine nature, on the other hand, denote the generic identity of the divinity as opposed to the created world. John's treatise on the Trisagion is more concerned with the former aspect. The philosophical background of identity, however, is not directly applicable in the Christian context: the mystery of the divinity's 'one' and 'three' surpasses the categories of classical thought.

We have seen, then, that the notion of identity does have its place in dogmatic theology. But what about the idea of space? In the present paper, we shall not discuss the nature of space as it is treated in classical philosophy, including the works of Plato and Aristotle, nor delve into its dogmatic meanings: we shall, however, briefly discuss the notion of περιχώρησις (sometimes translated into English with the Latin-rooted term *circumincession*), developed by John but inherited from his antecedent Maximos the Confessor, which is etymologically formed by the prefix περί ('around') and verb χωρέω ('contain'). The persons of the Trinity are, according to John, contained by each other (see Kotter 1973: 18–31), and the Trisagion is seen as a liturgical expression of this dogmatic notion. Nevertheless, this dogmatic term is not as such in the core of our source text, so we shall not develop it much further here. Additionally, we shall approach the notion of space from an anthropological viewpoint, in the spirit of Edward T. Hall's definition of *proxemics* (the study of human use of space and its effects on human behaviour) as 'the interrelated observations and theories of humans use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture' (Hall 1966: 1). More concretely, we shall discuss the influence of Arab rule and Monophysite controversies on the understanding of a liturgical gathering with like-minded Christians as a 'safe space' for strengthening communal identity through worship. It is in this 'space' that the Trisagion must be examined.

We shall first take a look at John Damascene's life and works, including his treatise on the Trisagion, after which we will provide a historical and theological context for this text. Then, we will see how the notion of hypostasis relates to the identities of the persons of the Trinity, especially through numerical argumentation. Since the treatise has not been much discussed in scholarship thus far, we shall pri-

4 The ultimate paradox of Christianity is the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God. But John's thought was much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, probably a Syrian author of the early sixth century, who is known as the main promoter of so-called apophatic theology: God can only be described through negation, since His substance (οὐσία) remains undiscoverable to men (see, for example, Stang 2012 for a recent study of Dionysios' idea of apophasis).

5 A summary of modern discussions of the philosophical notion of identity in the Trinity is Van Inwagen (2003); however, we shall not read John's treatise in light of this work on a larger scale due to a lack of space. This certainly remains a *desideratum* for future scholarship.

6 Again, one can see Aristotelian influence here: the Christian understanding of hypostasis can be seen as analogous to Aristotle's primary substance (οὐσία), marking the individual, and the notion of substance (οὐσία) corresponds to Aristotle's secondary substance, the universal species (see *Categories*).

7 An excellent, recent synthesis of these patristic ideas is Koutloumousianos (2015: 9–74). John uses the term ιδιώματα in his treatise on the Orthodox faith: he entitles the 14th chapter of the book as 'The properties (ιδιώματα) of the divine nature'. He also uses the word ιδίωμα to denote the characteristics of a hypostasis. See Kotter (1973: 42–3) and 272) for the unfortunately incomplete index listing of ιδίωμα. John develops the concept of ιδίωμα in his *Dialectica* by stating: 'That factor, then, in which an essence differs from an essence, a species from a species, or a hypostasis from a hypostasis, is called difference (διαφορά) and quality (ποιότης) and property (ιδίωμα)'; see Kotter 1969: 22.

marily be concerned with providing an overview of its triadological argumentation.

John Damascene and his *oeuvre*

John Damascene, one of the most prominent Christian theologians, philosophers and poets of the eighth century, but often discounted as an unoriginal thinker, lived at the crossroads of two cultures, languages, and religions. He was born in Damascus, most probably during the latter half of the seventh century. Damascus had become the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate in 651: John's family held a prominent position in the fiscal administration of the city, and his grandfather, Mansur ibn Sarjun, experienced the shift to Umayyad rule, nevertheless managing to stay in his position. John, whose name in the early years was also Mansur ibn Sarjun, apparently continued in the occupation of his father and grandfather, and he moved to Palestine perhaps around year 706, when the administrative language of the Caliphate was changed from Greek to Arabic. At this time, he became a monk with the name John (Ioannes or Yuhanna). Traditions differ as to where he became a monk: the ecclesiastical tradition claims he was a monk of the Mar Saba monastery, while some scholars suggest, basing their observations on the earliest biographical sources of John's life, that he was active only in the Anastasis church. The date of John's death is also unclear, but the heretic council of Hieria in 754 condemns 'Mansur' (usage of the Arabic name here indicates a mocking attitude) and implies that he is already dead (Louth 2002: 3–14).

John's *oeuvre* was composed exclusively in Greek. We do not possess knowledge as to whether or not he wrote Arabic, even though his affiliation with the Umayyad Empire would imply this. His works are many and varied: he composed liturgical poetry and prayers, sermons, dogmatic treatises, and descriptions of different heresies (most famously, the first Christian characterization of Islam in history).⁸ His most innovative theological contribution is a theology of images, used to argue against iconoclasm in

the eighth century and again, later on, in ninth-century Byzantium.⁹

In many ways, John was an outsider. Many of his anti-heretical treatises deal with problems in the Byzantine Empire, but he himself lived under Umayyad rule. In his home country he represented a religion different from that of its rulers. John's life coincided with the last of the great Christological struggles, culminating in the sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 680/1, where the doctrines of Christ's will and ἐνέργεια ('activity/operation') being only one, the ideas of so-called monoenergism and monotheletism, were declared to be heresies.

John was concerned with heresies. One of his main works, *On Heresies* (Kotter 1981), lists 100 heretical sects, following the tradition of a much earlier author, Epiphanius of Salamis, whose *Panarion* was a classical handbook of different heresies. John adds some more recent groups to the list which had been compiled by Epiphanius (cf. Louth 2002: 45–83), including, as we noted above, Islam. But in this paper our focus is on a less discussed work by John, his letter to a certain archimandrite Jordan on the correct singing of the Trisagion ('Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us').¹⁰ We shall, of course, compare and contextualize this text within John's thought in his other works, as well.

Surprisingly, apart from several modern editions, the text has not been widely discussed in scholarship. The letter is preserved in 39 manuscripts, of which the earliest dates back to the ninth century: ancient translations of the text are found in Arabic, Georgian, Latin, Slavonic and, perhaps, Armenian. The authenticity of the text was contested by Keetje Rozemond, who attributed the work to John Moschos,¹¹ but

8 A critical edition of many of John's works (even spurious ones) has been published by Bonifatius Kotter (1969, 1973, 1975, 1981, 1988) and Robert Volk (2006, 2009). Previously, Michel Le Quien edited his works in 1712; these were reprinted with some additions in Jacques Paul Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* (later referred to as PG), vols. 94–6.

9 See Kotter (1975) for John's three treatises on the veneration of images.

10 A critical edition of the text can be found in Kotter (1981: 304–32, preceded by an introduction, pp. 289–303). As far as I am aware, there is no English translation of the text, so the samples are always my own translations. For notes on the English translation of the Trisagion hymn itself, see Lash (nd).

11 See Rozemond (1991). The presentation was first given in the Oxford Patristic Conference in 1975; this spoken communication is what Kotter refers to in 1981. Also, Louth (2002: 156) describes Rozemond's idea as 'far-fetched'. Indeed, Rozemond's argumentation of the letter being only partly (chapters 27

Bonifatius Kotter, the editor of the collection of critical editions of John's *oeuvre*, regards Rozemond's theory faulty (Kotter 1981: 290–2). I share Kotter's well-argued view that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of this work, based on the different manuscript traditions either attributing the work explicitly to the Damascene or situating the work among others of his. Also, stylistic features support this idea: the text consists of, in a style typical for John, a letter followed by a *florilegium*, an anthology of relevant passages from earlier theologians' works.¹² There is also an epilogue following the *florilegium* that seems to be a later addition.¹³

The history of the Trisagion and the context of John's polemics

Before entering into the text, a few words should be said about the history of the Trisagion, a hymn that is still prominent in the Byzantine rite.¹⁴ All of the following historical information is also provided in John's treatise. The origins of the hymn are not known, but the fathers usually attribute its first form to the prophet Isaiah. In a vision, he describes how the seraphim cry out 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord Sabaoth' (Ἅγιος, Ἅγιος, Ἅγιος, Κύριος Σαβαώθ; Isa. 6:3 LXX).¹⁵ Tradition links the present form of the

hymn, 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us' (Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, ἅγιος ἰσχυρός, ἅγιος Ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς) to an earthquake which occurred on 24 September, some time between 434 and 446¹⁶ (even though the hymn must be much older): Patriarch Proklos ordered a vigil, during which a boy was taken up to the heavens, where he was told by angels to instruct the others to sing the hymn in the correct form.¹⁷

Since the latter half of the fifth century this hymn has been a symbol of the controversies between the Orthodox confession of Christ being one true hypostasis that consists of two natures, a doctrine confirmed in the council of Chalcedon in 451, and the 'Monophysite'¹⁸ or non-Chalcedonian party that prefers to emphasize the unity of Christ's person. Peter Knapheus, the non-Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch, had introduced an addition to the hymn: 'who wast crucified for us'. On the other hand, the Chalcedonian fathers used the prayer as their rallying cry. The Quinisext Council in Trullo, in 692, anathematized the use of the non-Chalcedonian formula.¹⁹

paraphrased, sometimes sung as such, sometimes added as a final 'doxology'.

and 28) the work of the Damascene seems to be on a shaky ground: she bases this on the word μόσχον in 26,19, while Kotter sees the word in its biblical meaning.

- 12 John is sometimes criticized, because of his abundant use of *florilegia*, as an 'unoriginal' author; see Louth (2002: vii). The *florilegium* in our source text includes teachings of (in order of appearance) Athanasios of Alexandria, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Proklos of Constantinople, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa.
- 13 Apart from Rozemond's treatise, this work has not been discussed much: only Louth (2002: 163–4) describes it briefly, even though the work is referred to multiple times during the monograph.
- 14 The most useful recent study of the Trisagion is by Sebastia Vicenc Janeras (1998). He discusses its role in the several liturgical traditions: this hymn is included as a part of initial rites of the mass/liturgy in all Eastern rites, as well as in the Hispanic and Gallic rites in the West (Janeras 1998: 496).
- 15 Janeras (1998: 496–533) notes different liturgical occasions, where the Trisagion appears in different rites. It is a particularly intertextual hymn, being interwoven into several other hymns, sometimes

- 16 At the moment, interesting work on the liturgical commemorations of earthquakes in Byzantium is being done by doctoral candidate Mark Roosien at the University of Notre Dame. Janeras (1998: 534) notes that the Trisagion is first attested to in explicit written form in the Council of Chalcedon in 451, even though indirect references to it refer to an earlier date, at least at the time of the Council of Ephesus in 431.
- 17 This narrative also implies that the hymn in its explicit form might have originally had a Christological meaning, which is also Janeras's (1998: 560) view.
- 18 Even though this term has been seen as polemical, and has sometimes been replaced with 'Miaphysitism', I continue to use this term throughout the paper, the reason being that John uses this particular term and refers to a particular understanding of the doctrine of Christ's single nature. This is exactly what John criticizes, not the non-Chalcedonian churches *per se* as local denominations: his attack is against the doctrine of Christ's single nature exposed by an Orthodox, not non-Chalcedonian church.
- 19 A theological and canonical examination of this hymn in a wider context of the theology of church singing is Seppälä (2005). The council exhorted: 'Whereas we have learnt that in certain lands the Trisagios hymn is sung with the addition, after the words "Holy Immortal," of the phrase "Who was crucified for us, have mercy upon us," though this was expunged from the hymn by the holy Fathers

John mentions at the beginning of his letter – which is dated after 735, in other words a few decades after the decree of the Quinisext Council – that a schism threatens the church: he has seen a *florilegium* compiled by the abbot of Euthymios' monastery situated on the West Bank (see Pringle 1998: 229–38), Abba Anastasios, where he claims that the Trisagion is addressed to the second person of the Trinity only. The letter is an exhortation to a certain Abba Jordan to persuade Anastasios to stop spreading his heresy. Abba Anastasios is, as John affirms, an Orthodox and not a Monophysite. Apparently, as the ending of the letter reveals, there have also been accusations against John, according to which he would have thought the hymn to be addressed to the second person of the Trinity, and another John, the patriarch of Jerusalem who had been deposed in 735. John defends both himself and the patriarch.

Identity and name: Trinitarian hypostases

After the short introduction of the letter, John begins to present his arguments. The first deals with the notion of hypostasis and its relation to name. For John, the identity of an individual is expressed by name, and each name corresponds to a hypostasis. John's definition of hypostasis builds on the fourth century Cappadocian fathers: in his *Dialectica*, a remarkable philosophical treatise, he defines the notion thus: Hypostasis 'signifies the individual, that which is numerically different ... it is that which by its own subsistence subsists of itself from essence and accidents, is numerically different, and is a certain one' (Kotter 1969: 21).

John sees the thrice-ness (and not any other amount of repetitions) of the word 'Holy' in Isaiah's vision to be a declaration of the three hypostases of the Trinity, while the singleness of the word 'Lord', as well as the latter addition 'Heaven and Earth is full of

of old as being foreign to true piety, together with the wicked heretic who invented these words; we, confirming that which has been decreed by our holy Fathers of old, anathematize any persons who still, after the present decree, receive these words in their Churches or make additions to the Trisagios hymn in any other wise. If the transgressor of that which has been decreed is of sacerdotal rank, we command that he should be stripped of his sacerdotal dignity; if a layman or monk, that he should be excommunicated.' (Nedungatt and Featherstone 1995: 161–2)

His [and not Their] glory', proclaims their common nature or substance (οὐσία) (Kotter 1981: 306–8). This is a classical Cappadocian definition: the deity forms the one essence of the Trinity, while it exists in three hypostases, each with his own name and properties or ιδιώματα (see Meredith 1995). Were the hymn addressed to Christ, the word 'Holy', according to John, should be sung only twice, in order to mark the two natures of Christ. Of course, this would not fit the Monophysite teaching of Christ's one nature. In the *florilegium*, John encounters a certain problem of argumentation, namely Athanasios of Alexandria, a prominent theologian of the fourth century, who describes how Isaiah saw Christ on a throne and then heard a thrice-holy hymn, the Trisagion. However, John argues that Isaiah saw also the two other persons of the Trinity in the same vision.

If, according to John, a name corresponds to a certain hypostatic identity, one encounters a problem: how can 'Holy' signify the property of an hypostasis, and not of substance (οὐσία), if the same name is applied to each identity? On the other hand, if the Triadic paradox of the God of the Christians implies that the worship of one of the hypostases applies to all three persons, what is the problem in addressing the hymn towards Christ, as the non-Chalcedonians did? John confirms that a hymn addressed to Christ should include some of the hypostatic names of the second person: 'the Son of God', 'the Logos', 'the Wisdom and Power of God'. The lack of these in the Trisagion shows it cannot be addressed to a certain hypostasis of the Trinity. The repetition of 'Holy' is, on the other hand, seen as a generic name for a species (εἶδος) but marking separate individuals. John provides an analogy: we can call each individual within humanity a human, so we can claim a town is inhabited by many humans. However, each human cannot be called many humans (πολύανθρωπος). In the same way, 'Holy' is a generic name that can be used of each hypostasis, but one hypostasis cannot be called thrice-holy (Kotter 1981: 308–9).

But what about the additional epithets linked with each 'Holy', namely God, Strong, and Immortal? Are they hypostatic or essential names? Here John, even if rather vaguely, refers to his idea of περιχώρησις, or circumincession. This means the dwelling of each hypostasis in the others, which is a consequence of the consubstantiality of the persons (ὁμοούσιος). So, the divinity (godhead, θεότης) is shared by all three hypostases and the power is also shared between



John of Damascus, icon from Damascus (Syria), 19th century, attributed to Iconographer Ne'meh Naser Homsî.

them, as well as immortality. John draws a parallel with these terms to the psalm verse 'my soul has thirsted for the living God' (Ps. 41:2 LXX), in which he sees an implication of God, Strong (which is not mentioned) and living (which he sees as a synonym for immortal) (Kotter 1981: 309–10).

In order to avoid confusion, John makes a note concerning Greek morphology. During the period in which he lived, the pronunciation of diphthongs had disappeared from Greek, so the diphthong *ei*, in earlier Greek pronounced as [e*i*], had been iotacized into a plain [i].²⁰ The word *τρεῖς*, when written with 'ει',

is a numeral and therefore denotes the numerically separate hypostases; however, when only *ι* is used, the word acquires an adverbial meaning. The hymn is titled with a 'ι'; therefore, in John's view, it notes that the Trinity is thrice holy, in other words each of the hypostases can be named holy. One hypostasis cannot be thrice holy, because then the Trinity would be nine times holy (Kotter 1981: 310).

One could, of course, ask what is the problem in calling each of the hypostases thrice-holy, which fundamentally means seeing thrice-holiness as a property of each hypostasis. Here John makes a fine distinction between apophatic and cataphatic theology; in other words, all the attributes of God tell us what he is and what he is not. If, indeed, thrice-holiness were a common attribute of each of the hypostases, it should be a marker of shared identity. Such attributes belong to the substance (οὐσία), inaccessible to man. But the number three is not inaccessibility; on the contrary it shows us what we know of God, and knowledge of the divine essence can only be attained through its hypostases. A circumscribable numeral cannot describe the uncircumscribability of the transcendent deity (Kotter 1981: 310–13). In the *florilegium* that follows the treatise, John traces this idea back to the fourth-century bishop Athanasios of Alexandria.²¹

Indeed, as is the case with the name 'God', holiness (in its uncircumscribable form) is an attribute of the divine nature. Later on in the treatise John emphasizes:

But then, again, someone would probably ask: when we say hypostasis, hypostasis, and hypostasis, why do we mean three hypostases, but when we say God, God, and God, we do not mean there are three gods? We answer to him: the particular attributes (τὰ μερικά) do not become common (οὐ κοινοποιούνται), while each particular (ἕκαστος τῶν μερικῶν) participates in the common attributes (τὰ κοινά), but in a unified and common way (ἐνιαῖος καὶ κοινός). Of course, each hypostasis is observed separately, but they do not form one, common hypostasis. Even though each hypostasis

came to be pronounced as *iota* [i]; for a detailed description of this development through medieval up to modern Greek, see Browning (1983).

21 See Kotter (1981: 316); the treatise in question is *De incarnatione et contra Arianos* (PG 26, 984).

20 Iotacism (sometimes spelled itacism) refers to the phonetic change in the Greek language in which a number of ancient Greek vowels and diphthongs

participates of divinity (θεότης), sanctification (ἀγιασμός), and lordship (κυριότης), the divinity is common for the three hypostases, being one. (Kotter 1981: 315)

The liturgical tradition as dogmatic authority

John affirms this by comparing the hymn with the rite of baptism (Kotter 1981: 312). A similar analogy was already drawn by the Cappadocian fathers. The triple immersion in water, combined with the baptismal formula ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’, underlines the connection of threeness with the hypostases. Not surprisingly, John refers here to Basil the Great, the fourth-century Cappadocian author, who also presented the baptism analogy.²² As in all anti-heretical polemics, the tradition of the church is seen as an authority. In addition to his reliance on Basil, John summarizes the tradition preceding him: no church father had ever used the notion of ‘thrice-holiness’ to refer exclusively to any one particular hypostasis and its hypostatic qualities (Kotter 1981: 312).

The importance of the liturgical tradition is immense for John.²³ As for the notion of tradition, it is central to the anti-heretical discourses. The term has been used with different meanings, but a distinction had already been made in the early church between Scripture and tradition; on the other hand, some church fathers, especially of the third-century Alexandrian school, made a distinction between a ‘public’ tradition, preserved in the writings and

practices of the Church (including the liturgy), and a ‘hidden’ tradition, received through personal revelation (see Turner 1954: 307–78). John exploits both of these concepts in his treatise: the apparition of the divinity during the earthquake and supporting it with Isaiah’s vision emphasizes the mystical tradition, while the liturgical argument underlines that the correct way of singing the hymn is echoed throughout the Orthodox liturgy.

John sees the whole discussion on the Trisagion as Peter Knapheus’s deviation from tradition (presuming that the tradition that the patriarch Proklos removed the phrase ‘who was crucified for us’ is accurate). John’s words towards Abba Anastasios are carefully phrased, but John compares Peter’s behaviour to the insolence of female prostitutes. The Monophysite variant of the hymn is equated with nothing less than death. So, John makes a clear difference between the Orthodox identity and its ‘other’, the heretics. Misunderstandings of Orthodox believers seem to be more tolerated (see Kotter 1981: 312–14). Here John also gives valuable testimony to the eighth-century Palestinian liturgical practice of using both biblical and non-biblical verses as interpolations between more recently-composed hymns (see Frøyskov 2013).

In what is probably a later addition to the letter, following the *florilegium*, John provides even more evidence on the liturgical use of the hymn. Liturgical commentaries are not a genre John favours – no such commentary *per se* has been preserved from his pen – while his contemporary, Germanos, the patriarch of Constantinople, composed the most prominent commentary on the divine liturgy for centuries to come.²⁴ But here, John sees the liturgical prayer following the performance of the Trisagion in the liturgy as the hymn’s commentary. This prayer is not recited in the contemporary form of the liturgy:

Thou art holy, O King of all ages, Lord, Giver of all sanctification, and holy is Thine only-begotten Son, through whom Thou hast all created; and

22 One of Basil’s main arguments on the consubstantiality of the three persons of the divinity was the traditional baptismal formula, even practised by most of the anti-Trinitarian Arians. See *De spiritu sancto*, chapter 18 (PG 32/4, 67).

23 The question of *lex orandi lex credendi*, a famous axiom attributed to the fifth-century church father Prosper of Aquitaine, has been widely discussed in Roman Catholic theology; see De Clerck (1978) and Schulz (1999); most recently Daniel Van Slyke (2004) has summarized the discussion on this saying and examined its historical background and meaning for Roman Catholic dogmatic theology. In the Orthodox theology, where dogmatic definitions are far fewer than in Roman Catholicism, the liturgical tradition has been considered authoritative when it comes to dogmatic self-understanding, since it is considered a part of the patristic tradition and is common to all Orthodox churches. Cf. Louth 2013: 13–15.

24 Germanos’ commentary, partly influenced by Maximos the Confessor’s commentary in the seventh century, deals with the so-called liturgy of St John Chrysostom. For a Greek text of the commentary, together with an English translation, see Meyendorff (1984); for a study of the position of Germanos’ commentary in the Byzantine tradition of liturgy commentaries, see Bornert (1966).

holy is Thine all-holy Spirit, who examines all, even Thine depths, O God (Kotter 1981: 330).

Actually, according to liturgical evidence, this hymn is a part of the so-called 'liturgy of St James', where it is not said after the Trisagion but after the Sanctus, which draws on the same quotation from Isaiah. This liturgy was celebrated in Palestine and, therefore, John's reference to it is natural.²⁵

Additionally, John refers to the common practice of reciting the Trisagion three times. This practice also requires further dogmatic clarification. Ruling out all possibilities of identifying thrice-holiness to the hypostases, John suggests that every time the hymn is chanted, it is addressed to all three persons of the Trinity. Why the triple repetition, however? John sees this as an imitation of the chant of the seraphim. We are unable to offer constant praise, like the angels, so we need to offer a limited amount of repetition. The number 3 is not only a symbol of the Trinity, but also a perfect number. Here he provides his own ontologico-numerological interpretation: '[A triad] is perfect and complete. For the monad has no quantity; the dyad is the beginning of a count; the triad is a perfect number' (Kotter 1981: 331). Here, a mathematician would note that this is not true. A perfect number, according to the Euclidian theory, is one that can be summed from its parts (see Stillwell 2010: 38–43). So, 6 is a perfect number, but not 3, unless one thinks 3 consists also of 1 and 2. But John sees here a more ontological basis: the perfection of the number 3 is not a Euclidian one, but the whole universe is built on this number. 'As Father is the Birth-Giver of the Son and the emitter of the Spirit, in the same way the count begins from dyad and takes ends in triad' (Kotter 1981: 331). And, again, follows a grammatical statement:

Therefore, also, the singular number marks singular; and the dual number marks a dual; and the plural marks a triad, and there is no other expression. When we say 'man,' we mean one man. When we say two men [τὼ ἀνθρώπων²⁶],

we mean two, and by 'men' we mean three men. (Kotter 1981: 331)

Conclusion

We have now seen various arguments that John has provided: they expand from new categories added to Aristotelian philosophy, but also delve into grammar and, perhaps primarily, rely on the authority of the earlier church. The treatise on the Trisagion is certainly not one of John's most remarkable works, at least not in a dogmatic sense. It is, for the most part, a summary of John's trinitarian and christological thought, and a rather monotonous description of his excellent articulation of the hypostatic and essential attributes.

But at the beginning I noted that the notions of 'space' and 'identity' are rather prominent in this text. They expand from the ontology of the Triadic God himself to cosmology; the Trisagion being its image. Even though the term *περιχώρησις* is not fundamental for the treatise, it is there nevertheless: we must once again point out how it creates an abstract spatiality in the Trinity itself. The essential name also becomes hypostatic, since an essence can be observed only through its hypostases. In the divinity, this creates a unique overlapping of identities. The number three is, *par excellence*, the organising principle of the world and expresses the trinity of hypostases. Therefore, the Trisagion cannot be anything else but addressed to all of the hypostases as a whole.

Nevertheless, what I find even more interesting is the duality of the Damascene's own attitude and identity. He clearly sees himself as a theological authority (and, according to historical sources, he certainly is so). The letter shows his pastoral care to his fallen fellow-believers, on one hand, while on the other hand his polemical attitude towards those who are not in communion with him. But John's polemics are not particularly aggressive, compared with many other church fathers: as can also be seen from his preaching,²⁷ he is rather gentle in his approach to his fellow-monk Anastasios. There is no trace of a traditional-for-polemics *vir malus*, no pejora-

25 For a recently-written history of the position of the liturgy of St James in Palestine, see Galadza (2018: 155–219).

26 This form is an archaic dual, which had disappeared from spoken Greek long before John's time, but was known to the learned public that studied also Homeric Greek and the classical Attic dialect.

27 I deal more extensively with John's polemical preaching (which is not particularly aggressive) in my forthcoming paper 'St John Damascene's polemical preaching: apology in liturgy'.

tive epithets;²⁸ John still calls the lost brother ‘most holy’ (ἱερώτατος) and ‘renowned’ (κλεινός). His only aggressive phrases are against the devil, ‘the enemy of the Church’ (ὁ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ὁ ἐχθρός) (Kotter 1981: 305), and Peter Knapheus, who preceded him by two centuries and was, therefore, a man of the past (even though there were still his followers around, who nevertheless were not the explicit object of the letter). Neither does John emphasize his own status as *vir bonus*, but externalizes this role to the receiver of his letter, Abba Jordan. The core of his polemics lies in clear and understandable argumentation.

And, finally, the letter shows that the liturgical space is a unique environment in which to defend the faith: nothing is more efficient in fighting heretical teachings than leaning on an existing liturgical tradition. That is an argument above any doctrinal articulation at any synod. However, most importantly, the letter should be, in the future, discussed as a part of John’s whole *oeuvre*, a pursuit that remains a *desideratum*. We have still a host of questions in front of us to be answered: his authentic *corpus* still requires further definition, and despite the excellent work conducted by Bonifatius Kotter, we do not have a critical edition of all the works attributed to John. Only through a meticulous study in both textual criticism and interpretative reading can we form a valid overall image of his significance to Christian theology. The present paper has hopefully been at least a small step forward on this path. ■

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28 Stenzel (1986: 7) notes that the representation of what he calls the ‘subject of polemics’ as *vir bonus* and the ‘object of polemics’ as *vir malus* is a standard topos in polemical discourse.

such as ‘Personification in Byzantine hymnography: kon-takia and canons’ (in *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition: Early, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives*, ed. A. Torrance & S. Paschalidis, Routledge 2018, 80–99).

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